

THE WORD OF GOD AND PATRIARCHALISM: A TYPOLOGY OF THE CURRENT CHRISTIAN DEBATE

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Questions concerning the relationship between Christianity and contemporary feminist concerns are an area of intense and often perplexing disagreement. Nowhere is this more true than on the particular issue of whether the Bible affirms patriarchalism as normative for contemporary Christian life. While the existence of patriarchal structures in the Christian Scriptures is obvious, there is a highly-nuanced debate as to whether this patriarchalism is presented as something to be recommended or rejected. A clear conception of the major positions in this debate is necessary to understand the numerous related issues in the ongoing dialogue about Christianity and women.

The purpose of this article is to provide a typology of the contemporary distinct positions regarding the relationship of the Word of God (that is, the *essential* teachings of Scripture¹) and the patriarchalism present in Scripture.

¹The distinction between Scripture per se and the Word of God, understood as the essential scriptural teachings which are still formative for Christian living, is functionally recognized by all Christian theological traditions. While conservatives sometimes distrust this distinction because of the way it has been used to establish an arbitrary "canon within the canon," they nevertheless use the distinction in practice. That is, they also argue that there are certain aspects of the clear teachings of Scripture such as the theocratic monarchy in the Old Testament or the communal church model of the book of Acts which are not normative for the present church. They are simply descriptive of a past, often mistaken, practice.

The particular focus of this typology can be further clarified by comparison with two other helpful typologies of the current debates regarding scriptural teachings on the role and status of women.

Willard Swartley has provided an insightful passage-by-passage comparison and analysis of the scriptural exegesis of the two major alternative camps in these debates—the “liberationist” and the “hierarchical.”² Swartley’s labels reflect the important insight that the crucial area of disagreement in these dialogues is whether Scripture endorses or condemns a (male) hierarchical ordering of society, home, and church. His passage-by-passage analysis reveals clearly how a prior commitment to either of these alternatives affects how one reads any particular text.³ What Swartley does not clarify is how adherents to either camp justify their foundational commitment to hierarchicalism or egalitarianism. Likewise, he does not adequately contrast the nuances of understanding within the major camps.

Robert Johnston has developed a typology that deals specifically with the evangelical debate about the biblical teachings on the role and status of women.⁴ Like Swartley, he focuses on the two major camps which he labels “Egalitarian” and “Traditionalist.” His most significant contribution is the demonstration that the debate ultimately hinges on how one understands the relationship between God’s revelation and human cultures, both in biblical times and today. In particular, is patriarchy a part of God’s revelation or only a cultural setting for God’s revelation? At one extreme are the “dualists” who assume that anything that can be shown to be culture-relative (patriarchy for instance) cannot be essential revelation. At the other extreme are the “spiritualizers” who assume that all of biblical (patriarchal) culture is divinely mandated and, therefore normative in all times and cultures.⁵ Johnston rightly rejects both of these extremes. Unfortunately, he does not adequately develop or discuss any mediating alternatives. Several nuanced alternatives are present in the ongoing dialogue and deserve to be presented.

Thus, building on the suggestions of Swartley and Johnston, we shall offer a typology of the current discussion of Christianity and women that focuses on the significant alternative conceptions of the relationship between the Word of God and the biblically-attested cultural model of patriarchy. We will divide our typology into the two major alternatives and discuss variations within each alternative. In each case we will both clarify the basic claims

²Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women* (Scottsdale PA: Herald Press, 1983), ch. 4.

³Ibid., 183ff.

⁴Johnston, *Evangelicals at an Impasse* (Atlanta GA: John Knox Press, 1979), ch. 3.

⁵Ibid., 55ff.

of the position in question and highlight the typical critiques addressed to it or the problematics faced by it.

I. PATRIARCHALISM IS THE WORD OF GOD

The fundamental conviction that unites the various members of the first major alternative is the affirmation that patriarchy is an essential aspect of the Christian revelation. The obvious implication is that any adequate Christian social structure or world view must ultimately be defined in patriarchal categories. As has been frequently pointed out, this means not only that males must hold the final power in social contexts but also that the "male" is understood as the paradigmatic expression of humanity, if for no other reason than that males embody most directly God's sovereign authority.

What distinguishes the various members of this first alternative are the courses of action they recommend based on their shared conviction of the identity of the Word of God and patriarchy. For some, this means that Christians must vigorously reaffirm patriarchy in the face of contemporary cultural forces demanding egalitarianism—forces which, by definition, must be un-Christian. The cries of those who are oppressed by patriarchy have led others in this general camp to attempt a distinction between male hierarchy per se (which is biblical) and the sinful distortions of misogynist patriarchy. Their goal is to affirm a "reformed" patriarchy as essential to Christianity. Finally, some, based on the conviction of the identity of Christianity and patriarchy, have rejected Christianity in favor of other religious expressions or philosophies that they judge more conducive to the affirmation of women.

A. Christianity as Patriarchal Reaffirmed

What might best be called the traditionalist position in the current debate focuses its energies on defending patriarchy as an essential aspect of Christianity in the face of its contemporary liberationist critics. Important representatives of this position would include Stephen Clark, Susah Foh, James Hurley, and George Knight.⁶ Essential to this position is the conviction that the patriarchal social structure evident in Scripture—particularly in

⁶Stephen B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ* (Ann Arbor MI: Servant Press, 1980); Susan Foh, *Women and the Word of God* (Philadelphia PA: Presbyterian & Reformed Press, 1980); James B. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan Press, 1981); and George W. Knight, III, *The Role Relationship of Men and Women* (Chicago IL: Moody Press, 1985).

the Old Testament—remains a normative pattern for contemporary Christian life.⁷

The most direct way this fundamental claim is argued is the assertion that God supernaturally prepared or guided the patriarchal biblical culture in such a way that it, unlike all other cultures, might be a true embodiment of divine ideals.⁸ The same point is made more indirectly by arguing that any attempt to distinguish between culture and revelation in Scripture ultimately imposes an external subjective standard on Scripture and, hence, must be rejected.⁹ Such an argument leads inevitably to the affirmation of biblical culture as normative for today.

Arguments for such a seemingly total endorsement of biblical culture simply cannot be accepted at face value. In reality, those who protest most loudly against the appeal to the distinction between culture and revelation in regard to patriarchalism use that same appeal themselves in other matters. Their attempts to explain why such an appeal is legitimate in their case and not in the former case are far from satisfactory.¹⁰ As a result, their appeals to this or related arguments are often inconsistent.¹¹

If the traditionalist position cannot be adequately based on a simplistic rejection of the culture/revelation distinction or a fideistic endorsement of the whole of biblical culture as divinely ordained, then we must turn our attention to their exegetical claims. What scriptures do they believe affirm patriarchalism as God's will for all time?

⁷Cf. Hurley's long description of the Old Testament pattern as thoroughly patriarchal and his claim that Jesus' call was for a return to this pattern and a rejection of later Jewish distortions. Hurley, *Man and Woman*, 30-57, 78.

⁸For example, Elizabeth Elliott Leitch, "Feminism or Femininity," *Cambridge Fish* 5 (Winter 1975-6): 2, 6, quoted in Johnston, *Evangelicals*, 59; and Thomas Howard (with Donald Dayton), "A Dialogue on Women, Hierarchy and Equality," *Post American* (now *Sojourners*) 4, (May 1975): 9. These, of course, are examples of what Johnston termed a "spiritualizing" approach and rejected.

⁹For example, Foh, *Women*, 44. Cf. Clark, *Man and Woman*, 226-31, 279.

¹⁰For example, Foh argues that the presence of monarchies in the Old Testament does not make them normative for Christians because they are simply described and never directly commanded by God as was patriarchalism. However, one could easily appropriate a typical inerrantist argument and claim that since God did tell monarchs how to rule and since Jesus and Paul never explicitly reject monarchialism, it is implicitly endorsed. The distinction Foh advances is simply not that clear. Cf. Foh, *Women*, 30ff.

¹¹Cf. Johnston, *Evangelicals*, 66ff. A good example is Knight, who can render slavery a cultural phenomenon while arguing that patriarchalism is not. (Knight, *Role Relationship*, 10ff). On this matter Foh and Clark are more consistent, for they conclude that slavery is also in keeping with Scripture as long as the owner treats slaves fairly and respects them as persons! Cf. Foh, *Women*, 31-35; and Clark, *Man and Woman*, 153-54. However, their consistency ultimately breaks down even here for they see slavery as only a permissible Christian alternative, not a required norm as is the case with patriarchalism. See Clark, *Man and Woman*, 158-69.

As might be expected, traditionalists appeal primarily to the Genesis accounts of the creation and fall of humanity. More specifically, they appeal to Genesis 2 and 3, typically discounting the relevance of Genesis 1 for social roles.¹² They argue that the Genesis accounts teach clearly that woman is a secondary creation who, while of equal spiritual value with man, is ordained to a subordinate helping role in relationship to man's leadership role.¹³

Traditionalists vigorously deny any suggestion that such subordination inherently demeans or oppresses women. Oppression results only from patriarchalism's sinful distortions or misuses. In itself, the patriarchal relationship is neither sinful nor the result of sin: it is God's ideal for humanity.¹⁴ Indeed, some in the traditionalist camp argue that the essence of Eve's curse following the Fall, far from being the imposition of patriarchalism, was the birth of woman's rebellious spirit against God's ordained patriarchal system—a spirit which, by its very struggle, makes patriarchalism oppressive. In other words, the contemporary feminist drive for equality is seen as the modern expression of the God-imposed curse for Eve's sin and the real source of women's oppression!¹⁵

But what about passages such as Genesis 1:26-27 and Galatians 3:28 which seem to teach the equality of male and female? Traditionalists typically interpret such verses as dealing primarily with an equality of spiritual value and as having no direct implications for social roles.¹⁶ Moreover, those who believe these verses might imply that the ultimate Christian hope is for an egalitarian society deny the present application of this hope because of their heavily future-oriented eschatology. In the fullness of the Reign of God we will be equal, but that will come only with the Eschaton. Until then, we must live in the divinely-mandated penultimate state of patriarchalism.¹⁷

Obviously, the primary question which the traditionalist claims must face concerns their exegetical and hermeneutical adequacy. As we shall see, many biblical scholars find their claims highly problematic and suggest that egali-

¹²For example, Clark claims that Genesis 1 teaches only that both men and women are good and important to God but says nothing about role relationships (Clark, *Man and Woman*, 14, 24ff). Likewise, Hurley sees Genesis 1 as dealing with humanity's relationship to God and Genesis 2 as "adding" information on humanity's relationship to the world and each other (Hurley, *Man and Woman*, 31).

¹³This argument is made most clearly by Clark, *Man and Woman*, 24-26.

¹⁴See *ibid.*, 33-34, 40-42.

¹⁵Cf. Foh, *Women*, 68-69; and Hurley, *Man and Woman*, 218-19.

¹⁶For example, Knight, *Role Relationship*, 7-8; Hurley, *Man and Woman*, 126; and Clark, *Man and Woman*, 155.

¹⁷One thinks in particular of Hurley, *Man and Woman*, 79-82. Another classic example is Charles Ryrie, *The Place of Women in the Church* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1958).

tarian interpretations are more adequate to Scripture. In addition, feminists would maintain that it is not merely the abuse of patriarchalism that is oppressive to women, but the very system itself.¹⁸ Finally, most theologians would argue that there must be a greater correlation between eschatological hope and the present norms of the Christian life than is evident in the example cited in the preceding paragraph.

B. Reformed Patriarchalism as Christian

The second group that affirms patriarchalism as essential to Christianity might, as one representative says, best be called "liberated traditionalists."¹⁹ The most articulate example of this position is Donald Bloesch.²⁰ Like the traditionalists, liberated traditionalists are convinced that male hierarchy in home and church (but not society at large?²¹) is God's clear plan for humanity. However, they are sensitive to the oppressive ways in which this hierarchy has often been enforced. This sensitivity accounts for the major difference—one of degree, not kind—which distinguishes them from the traditionalists. Rather than focusing their primary attention on reasserting patriarchalism, they focus on a biblical critique of the abuses of patriarchalism and attempt to portray what they would consider a truly Christian form of patriarchalism.

At the core of the liberated traditionalist stance is a perceived significant change between Genesis 2 and Genesis 3. Genesis 2, they claim, portrays an ordained male hierarchy, but one exercised in love. After the Fall, males began to abuse their God-given rights and to "lord it over" women. Since Christ came to break the power of sin, Christians must cease their own oppressive patriarchal behavior and seek to overcome similar oppressive expressions in

¹⁸To illustrate this claim, consider Hurley's treatment of the Judah/Tamar story (Hurley, *Man and Woman*, 35). He suggests this text condemns the abuse of the patriarchal system evident in the refusal of Judah's sons to uphold the levirate system and be surrogate fathers of a son for Tamar. What he never considers is how the levirate system itself is oppressive to women, both in valuing them only for their ability to produce sons and in giving them no legal right to reject the "privilege" of being used by one other than their husband to produce a child. Cf. Randy L. Maddox, "Tamar—A Feminist Foremother?" *Daughters of Sarah* 13:4 (July/August 1987): 14-17.

¹⁹Ronald and Beverly Allen, *Liberated Traditionalism: Man and Women in Balance* (Portland OR: Multnomah, 1985).

²⁰See Donald Bloesch, *Is the Bible Sexist?* (Westchester IL: Crossway Books, 1982); and *idem*, *The Battle for the Trinity* (Ann Arbor MI: Servant Press, 1985).

²¹Liberated traditionalists seem reticent to defend male hierarchy in society at large. Women can be political and business leaders as long as they, if married, are subordinate to their husbands and, in church—even if ordained—are subordinate to male leadership (Cf. Bloesch, *Sexist*, 34-39).

our society. However, Christian men must not forsake their continuing God-ordained position of male leadership.²²

In effect, the emphasis on eliminating abuses from the patriarchal system leads to the verge of rejecting patriarchy *per se*. Indeed, liberated traditionalists like to portray their position as an alternative to both feminism and patriarchy. The strongest evidence for such a claim lies in their argument that the truly Christ-like way to exercise male leadership is to submit mutually to the woman or to serve her self-sacrificially.²³

This "covenantalism" sounds almost like the egalitarian approach to male/female relationships we will treat later. However, there is a catch. Liberated traditionalists argue that the marriage covenant in particular is not really between equals. Husband and wife should submit mutually and find ways of agreeing on all issues, but, if they cannot reach agreement, then the husband has the final choice!²⁴ Thus, ultimately, patriarchy still reigns in liberated traditionalism (a charge supported as well by the prevalence of masculine/feminine stereotypes in their writings²⁵).

While liberated traditionalists modify the traditionalist stance slightly, drawing on Christ's model of headship, they would face the same general critiques and problems as the traditionalists. Does Genesis 2 really teach male hierarchy? Can patriarchy *per se* truly be rendered non-oppressive? And so forth.

C. Christianity as Patriarchy Rejected

The third group that identifies patriarchy as essential to Christianity is presented primarily for the sake of typological completeness, not as a viable Christian option. Indeed, what distinguishes this group is a shared rejection of Christianity because of its patriarchy and a resulting search for other religious expressions or philosophies that they believe are inherently more affirmative of women.

The classic contemporary example of one who has made this move is Mary Daly.²⁶ Numerous other examples can also be cited.²⁷ The point to note about

²²For example, Bloesch, *Sexist*, ch. 2, esp. 32; and Allen, *Traditionalism*, 95ff.

²³Cf. Bloesch, *Sexist*, 84ff; and Allen, *Traditionalism*, 125-26.

²⁴For example, Bloesch, *Sexist*, 58.

²⁵Cf. *ibid.*, 55, 66, etc.

²⁶See especially, Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: 1973); and *idem*, "Feminist Postchristian Introduction," *The Church and the Second Sex*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1975).

²⁷For example, Naomi Goldenberg, *Changing of the Gods* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), esp. 25; and John Phillips, *Eve* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1984), esp. 170-76.

this group, for our purposes, is that they agree with the exegetical stance of the traditionalists. They simply find the resulting understanding of Christianity as neither true nor salvific for their lives. Such a decision is, of course, theirs to make, but it would be a particularly unfortunate one, if the egalitarians are right in claiming that patriarchalism is based on a false understanding of Christianity.

II. THE EGALITARIAN WORD OF GOD REJECTS PATRIARCHALISM

The fundamental conviction that unites the various members of the second major alternative in the present debates about Christianity and women is the claim that the most essential Christian revelation (the Word of God) is thoroughly egalitarian. God never intended human society to be patriarchal; we made it that way ourselves in our sinful attempts to play God and now we suffer at our own hands (of course, some suffer much more than others). The patriarchal culture that is evident in Scripture is simply one manifestation of the sinful human culture to which the liberating Word of God is addressed, not an ideal of that Word.

What distinguishes the various members of this "Christian feminist" alternative are their differing understandings of what constitutes the liberating Word of God and how this Word is related to or distinguished from Scripture.

One group offers the important argument that a distinction can be made in all scriptural accounts between what is intended to be taught and what is merely described. Based on this distinction, they claim that the Word of God—that is, what is intended to be taught—clearly affirms egalitarian human relationships. More importantly, they believe (or hope) that such a distinction will allow them to find at least indirect evidence of the egalitarian thrust of the Word of God in all of Scripture, thereby retaining all of Scripture as authoritative for Christian feminist life.

A second group is not persuaded that all segments of Scripture can be fairly construed in an egalitarian manner. Indeed, they argue that Scripture itself bears witness to a history of self-criticism whereby the definitive revelation, the authoritative Word of God, is seen most clearly only in certain paradigmatic traditions, particularly the prophetic and messianic traditions. These paradigmatic traditions are then used to critique the other scriptural traditions.

A final group argues that the true locus of the Word of God should not be identified with any definitive textual tradition in Scripture. Rather, it should be identified with the community of faith which both lies behind Scripture itself and provides the authoritative norm for the interpretation of Scripture: women-church.

A. *Word of God as the Intention of Scripture*

The first major subgroup of egalitarian interpreters of Scripture usually refers to themselves as "biblical feminists." This title is chosen specifically to convey their conviction that an egalitarian approach to Christian life and social structures can be shown to be consistent with the normative teachings of the whole of Scripture. Important representatives of this position would include Scott Bartchy, Gilbert Bilezikian, Mary Evans, Nancy Hardesty, Letha Scanzoni, and (the early) Phyllis Trible.²⁸

Biblical feminists agree with traditionalists that the whole of Scripture, rightly interpreted, is authoritative for Christian life and practice. However, they are convinced that the traditional understanding of Scripture in the area of male/female relationships is wrong. Indeed, they claim that it is diametrically opposed to the actual egalitarian intention of Scripture.²⁹ Unfortunately, this traditional understanding has so predisposed the majority of contemporary readers of Scripture that they no longer see Scripture's egalitarian thrust and thus do not sense its dissonance with traditional justifications of patriarchy.

As such, the primary task of biblical feminists is to present a renewed egalitarian reading of the Bible which, they hope, can persuade others that it is more faithful to the breadth and nature of Scripture than the traditionalist alternative.

To begin with, biblical feminists argue that a careful reading of Genesis 1 and 2 actually reveals an understanding of the human male and female sharing equally in spiritual value and in divinely-appointed responsibility for creation. In Genesis 1, both are created in the image of God, suggesting an equality that it would be arbitrary to limit to the "spiritual" level. The account in Genesis 2 offers nothing to contradict this equality. Indeed, it could be argued that Eve's subsequent creation from Adam's side is more likely to imply that Eve is superior to Adam and the epitome of humanity (compare the "progression" of sequence in Genesis 1) than it is to imply that she is subordinate to Adam, as traditionalists argue. Actually, most biblical feminists view both of these possibilities as improbable, arguing that the account

²⁸S. Scott Bartchy, "Power, Submission and Sexual Identity Among the Early Christians," *Essays on New Testament Christianity*, 50-80, ed. J. G. Robert Weizel (Standard Press, 1978); Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing House, 1985); Mary J. Evans, *Woman in the Bible* (Downer's Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1982); Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be: Biblical Feminism Today*, rev. ed. (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1986); and Phyllis Trible, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," *JAAR* 41 (1973): 30-48.

²⁹Cf. Nancy Hardesty, letter in *Christianity Today* 20 (4 June 1976): 25.

really stresses the commonality, equality and interdependence of humanity as male and female.³⁰

Unfortunately, this ideal balance of Genesis 1-2 does not describe life today because of the distorting effects of sin on human life described in Genesis 3. As this account notes, both Adam and Eve³¹ were tempted by the serpent to forsake their loving obedience to God and to seek instead the prerogatives of God for themselves. Tragically, they both grabbed at this chance to dictate the meaning and order of their life, thereby destroying the true meaning and order that were present. Among the casualties of this fall was the egalitarian relationship of male and female. Now each tries to control the other. As Genesis 3:16 puts it, the woman now longs to control the man³² and he, in return, "lords it over" her.

In other words, biblical feminists believe the Genesis creation accounts portray patriarchal domination of women as a distortion of human life resulting from sin. The Fall did not just corrupt a previously (or ideally) good patriarchal system, as the liberated traditionalists argued; it brought patriarchalism into being. This inherently oppressive social structure is not God's will. Neither is it a type of penalty or punishment assigned to women by God to compensate for Eve's disobedience.³³ It is simply and entirely opposed to God's egalitarian design for humanity.

But, if patriarchalism is contrary to God's will for humanity, then why is there so much patriarchalism evident in the social laws and religious practices of the Old Testament?³⁴ In response to this question biblical feminists draw on a fundamental hermeneutical distinction between what Scripture describes and what it prescribes: since Scripture *both* describes situations of human sinfulness *and* records the liberating Word of God addressed to these situations, not everything mentioned in Scripture is intended as a recommendation for Christian life.³⁵

The particular application which biblical feminists make of this principle is to argue that the patriarchalism present in Old Testament social structures and religious practices is part of the continuing effect of sin described in

³⁰On Genesis 1-2, see Bilezikian, *Sex Roles*, 21-37; and Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1978), 72-143.

³¹See Trible, *God and Rhetoric*, 113.

³²Cf. Evans, *Woman*, 19-20.

³³Cf. Bilezikian, *Sex Roles*, 54ff.

³⁴For an excellent summary of the patriarchalism in the Old Testament, see Phyllis A. Bird, "Images of Women in the Old Testament," 41-88, *Religion and Sexism*, ed. R. Ruether (New York: Simon & Schuster Publishers, 1974).

³⁵Cf. David Scholer, "Unseasonable Thoughts on the State of Biblical Hermeneutics," *American Baptist Quarterly* 2 (1983): 134-41, esp. 139.

Scripture, not a way of life prescribed by Scripture.³⁶ I Indeed, they claim that a careful reading of the passages that describe such patriarchal practices reveals either God's word of judgment on these practices³⁷ or, at the very least, moderations of these practices in comparison with the surrounding non-biblical cultures.³⁸

Biblical feminists find such condemnation of patriarchalism even more evident in the New Testament. Indeed, they argue that, since the primary work of Christ was the overcoming of the guilt and domination of sin in human life, patriarchalism—being an expression of sin—was overcome by Christ and should be rejected by Christians. They find warrant for this conclusion both in Jesus' own egalitarian lifestyle³⁹ and in Paul's manifesto in Galatians 3:28 that "in Christ" there is no longer male or female—a statement they take to be a rejection of the patriarchal ordering of human worth and social roles.⁴⁰

But what about the passages in the New Testament that are used so frequently to argue that Christian women must be subordinate in the home and silent in the church? Since these passages are part of the definitive Christian revelation and since many of them are clearly didactic in nature, it does not seem possible to neutralize them as merely "descriptive of biblical religion."⁴¹

Biblical feminist responses to this question take two major forms, depending on the passage in question.⁴² In many cases, they argue that the traditional reading and use of the passage in question is simply wrong. For example, it is very possible that the assertion that women ought to be silent in church in I Corinthians 14:34 is a quotation from Paul's opponents that he is writing to reject.⁴³ If so, then use of this passage to reject women in ministry is actually contradictory to Paul.

³⁶Cf. Tribble, "Depatriarchalizing," 31.

³⁷Cf. Maddox, "Tamar." See also Phyllis Tribble's powerful exposition of four OT texts which present misogynist acts, an exposition which clearly calls forth both condemnation of the acts and repentance for the acts from all who follow the God of the prophets. Tribble, *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

³⁸See Bilezikian, *Sex Roles*, ch. 3.

³⁹For example, Evans, *Woman*, ch. 3.

⁴⁰For example, Bilezikian, *Sex Roles*, 127-8.

⁴¹Indeed, most biblical feminists limit appeal to the descriptive/prescriptive principle to Old Testament texts.

⁴²For specific biblical feminist treatments of the issue of women in ministry, see: Alvera Mickelsen, ed., *Women, Authority and the Bible* (Downer's Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1986); David Scholer, "Women in Ministry," *The Covenant Companion* (December 1983-February 1984); and Aida Spencer, *Beyond the Curse: Women Called to Ministry* (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson Sons, 1985).

⁴³Cf. Bilezikian, *Sex Roles*, 144-53, 245-50.

In some other cases, biblical feminists admit that New Testament authors recommend actions that seem to make concessions to patriarchal culture. However, they argue that these concessions are clearly temporary and/or situation-related. They are seen as analogous to Paul's becoming "like a Jew" in order to win Jews (I Corinthians 9:20). The prohibition of women from teaching in I Timothy is frequently cited as such a temporary concession. It is a non-typical action in response to a specific situation in the church at Ephesus.⁴⁴ Understandably, biblical feminists regard it as illegitimate to turn such a temporary concession into a universal Christian norm—something they accuse traditionalists of doing.⁴⁵

In summary, biblical feminists believe it is possible, through careful exegetical and hermeneutical clarification, to show that the whole of Scripture supports an egalitarian understanding of the status and roles of women and men. Obviously, the success of their project will depend on whether their exegetical and hermeneutical reflections have the clarity and warrant to convince others.

That their task is a difficult one is made most clear by occasional departures from their own ranks. One of the more poignant examples is Phyllis Trible. In earlier days she responded to charges that the Bible was enslaving for women with the claim that the clear intentionality of biblical faith was egalitarian and redemptive.⁴⁶ More recently she has spoken more cautiously, acknowledging—with noticeable pathos—that the dominant perspective in Scripture is patriarchal. To be sure, she still recognizes important egalitarian countervoices in Scripture, many of which are all too neglected. However, she now believes that these countervoices warrant, at best, a "remnant theology" in the midst of the more dominant religious justifications of patriarchy.⁴⁷ No longer can the whole of Scripture be reclaimed.

B. The Word of God as the Prophetic-Messianic Traditions

The second major subgroup of Christian feminists agrees with biblical feminists that it is important to provide warrant from Scripture for their egalitarian convictions since Scripture is the final norm of Christian belief. How-

⁴⁴Cf. David Scholer, "I Timothy 2:9-15 and the Place of Women in the Church's Ministry," 193-219, in Mickelsen, *Women*.

⁴⁵See especially Bartchy's careful distinction between normative, descriptive and problematic texts pertaining to the role and status of women in the New Testament. His underlying thesis is that traditionalists wrongly treat problematic texts (which make concessions) as normative. Bartchy, "Power." N. B. Bartchy now prefers the labels "instructive," "descriptive" and "corrective" as less "loaded."

⁴⁶Trible, "Depatriarchalizing," 31.

⁴⁷See especially, Trible, *God and Rhetoric*, xvi, 202; and Trible, "Feminist Hermeneutics and Biblical Studies," *Christian Century* 99 (1982): 116-18.

ever, they also agree with Tribble that Scripture does not contain a uniform perspective on the issues of patriarchy. As such, their central problematic (one which Tribble herself never adequately addresses) is how to justify the "remnant" egalitarian stance in Scripture, since such an option necessarily results in the rejection of other biblically-warranted stances. An understanding of this second approach can best be gained by a survey of the methodological reflections of its leading exemplar: Rosemary Radford Ruether.⁴⁸

It will be remembered that the central conviction of the biblical feminists was that one could show that patriarchy was condemned by the fundamental intention of the whole of Scripture. Ruether does not agree. She is convinced that there is evidence throughout the entire Scripture of two competing religions or theological trajectories—the religion of the "sacred canopy" which strives to preserve the existing hierarchical social order and the religion of the prophetic-messianic critique of this existing social order.⁴⁹ The texts derived from and indicative of the "sacred canopy" trajectory contain patriarchal and misogynist elements that, Ruether believes, are clearly intentional. By contrast, she argues that the spirit of the prophetic-messianic trajectory, if not its explicit texts, rejects all religious sanctifications of patriarchal, hierarchical and oppressive social relationships.⁵⁰

In light of these conflicting traditions within Scripture, Ruether argues that the only possible method for a Christian feminist interpreter is to opt for the prophetic-messianic tradition (or spirit) as most truly the Word of God and to use this tradition to expose and reject the patriarchal and misogynist elements in the rest of Scripture.⁵¹ But, what is the basis for such an option?

Ruether advances several arguments for the feminist endorsement of the prophetic-messianic tradition. In the first place, she claims that this tradition

⁴⁸See especially, Ruether, "Feminism and Patriarchal Religion: Principles of Ideological Critique of the Bible," *JSOT* 22 (1982): 54-66; *idem*, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), ch. 1; *idem*, "Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed., Letty Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 11-24; and *idem*, "Feminism and Religious Faith," *Religion and Intellectual Life* 3 (1986): 7-20.

⁴⁹See Ruether, "Patriarchal Religion," 55-56. For a similar, more detailed, description of two trajectories (Royal and Liberation) in the Old Testament, see Walter Brueggemann, "Trajectories in Old Testament Literature and the Sociology of Ancient Israel," *JBL* 98 (1979): 161-85. N.B. biblical feminists could apparently agree with Ruether that some authors of Old Testament materials intended to teach patriarchy. Such is to be expected in incomplete revelation. However, they would deny, no doubt, that such occurred in the New Testament and would argue that the uniform New Testament egalitarian perspective clarifies the canonical intention of the Old Testament passages. Cf. Bilezikian, *Sex Roles*, ch. 3. Traditionalists, of course, would maintain that all of Scripture endorsed patriarchy.

⁵⁰See Rosemary Ruether, "A Religion for Women: Sources and Strategies," *Christianity and Crisis* 39 (1979): 307-11, esp. 310.

⁵¹Ruether, "Patriarchal Religion," 60; and *idem*, "Feminist Interpretation," 117.

correlates with the critical principle of feminist theology.⁵² In itself, this argument surely strikes her opponents as an arbitrary imposition of a modern feminist norm on Scripture. However, Ruether would argue that Scripture manifests a dynamic internal *self*-critique of the royal tradition by the prophetic-messianic tradition. Christian feminists are simply following this biblical model.⁵³ Moreover, they are following the example of Jesus, who was a clear model of the prophetic-messianic critique of existing social structures.⁵⁴ Accordingly, the Christian feminist approach to Scripture would be consistent with and warranted by Scripture itself.

In her most recent reflections Ruether has further clarified her Christian feminist approach to Scripture. In particular, she has dealt more fully with the problem that the prophetic-messianic tradition is not as explicitly and uniformly critical of patriarchy as Christian feminists might hope. Like all human endeavors, the prophetic consciousness of and critique of oppression was contextual. Since most Hebrew prophets were male, they were typically more conscious of economic and political oppression than of sexual oppression.⁵⁵

Ruether does not believe that this fact invalidates the Christian feminist option for the prophetic-messianic tradition in Scripture. Rather, it necessitates a second step in the Christian feminist methodology. Having discerned the liberating nature of the Word of God by means of its expression in the context of one form of oppression, Christian feminists must now articulate the implications of this Word of God for another form of oppression—patriarchy. They must treat the biblical texts as limited historical prototypes which need to be translated and recontextualized. In doing so, they will be going beyond the explicit statements of the biblical authors. However, they would retain the critical pattern and direction of prophetic thought.⁵⁶ As such, Ruether claims, her Christian feminist program would remain a biblically-warranted approach.

Paul Jewett and Virginia Mollenkott have employed a method of Christian feminist interpretation very analogous to that of Ruether to deal with the passages in the Pauline letters which command the silence of women in church

⁵²Ruether, "Feminist Interpretation," 116ff.

⁵³Ruether, "Patriarchal Religion," 55, 59-60.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 60-61.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 65; and Rosemary Ruether, *Women-Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1985) 42-43.

⁵⁶See Ruether, "Religious Faith," 12-13; *idem*, *Sexism*, 31-33; *idem*, *Women-Church*, 48; and *idem*, "Review of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's *Bread Not Stone*," *JAAR* 54 (1986): 141-43.

and the submission of women in marriage.⁵⁷ Implicit in their approach is a rejection (or lack of knowledge) of the biblical feminists' claim that the patriarchal readings of these passages are misreadings and do not fit the larger context of Paul's thought. Jewett and Mollenkott admit that these passages do not agree with other egalitarian statements of Paul. However, they attribute this inconsistency to conflicts within Paul's own thought process, not to later interpreters.

Essentially, Jewett and Mollenkott argue that the contradictions in Paul's letters are the result of a struggle in Paul's pastoral and theological reflection between his (patriarchal) rabbinical training and the new understanding of freedom and equality he had discovered in Christ—an understanding epitomized in Galatians 3:28. Usually, Paul was able to apply this new understanding consistently to social and religious practices in the first-century world. However, on occasion, he would slip back into the rabbinic mindset of his early training. The problematic passages regarding women are considered an example of such a regression. Thus, here again is a struggle between two traditions, though this time internal to a single author.⁵⁸

Like Ruether, Jewett and Mollenkott argue that we must accept Paul's convictions about the equality of male and female as normative and reject those passages that purportedly reflect his rabbinic training. But, why? Is it simply a matter of preference? While Mollenkott never directly addresses this question, Jewett prefaces his discussion of Paul with a summary of the egalitarian model of Jesus, thereby suggesting that this model is the norm for considering Paul.⁵⁹ So, once again, it could be argued that the practice of Scripture itself warrants such a Christian feminist reading of the Bible.

A major question which this overall approach to a feminist interpretation of Scripture must address more fully is whether the supposition that there are fundamental contradictions in Scripture inherently undercuts Scripture's ability to be a reliable guide in matters of human social relationships. If Scripture does not speak with one voice, how can it give definitive answers?⁶⁰ The

⁵⁷Paul K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Press, 1976), 111ff; and Virginia Mollenkott, *Women, Men and the Bible* (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1977), ch. 5.

⁵⁸Unless, of course, one used the misogynist elements as a standard for distinguishing the true Paul from deuterio-Paul. Cf. Robin Scroggs, "Paul and the Eschatological Woman," *JAAR* 40 (1972): 293-303. While Paul himself would thus be absolved of the guilt for this regression, the overall canonical problem would remain the same: which position is normative?

⁵⁹Jewett, *Man*, 94-103.

⁶⁰Mollenkott's suggestion that Scripture can still be true even if some of Paul's arguments reflect his human limitations because Scripture accurately records these limitations (Mollenkott, *Women*, 104) misses the point. Theologians do not appeal to Scripture primarily as a witness for reconstructing an author's mindset. They appeal to Scripture for a definitive teaching

affirmation of either of the contrasting opinions could easily be construed as simply a matter of personal preference.

Accordingly, a second major problem that faces this approach is whether it can convincingly demonstrate not just the possibility of its specific identification of the egalitarian "Word of God" but also the inherent probability or necessity of this identification. The difficulty of defending such a selective identification of the Word of God by internal criteria is precisely the problematic that lies behind the remaining Christian feminist approach to Scriptural teachings on women.

C. The Word of God as the Experience of Women-Church

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is presently developing a truly distinctive Christian feminist approach to the interpretation of Scripture.⁶¹ She agrees with Ruether, against the biblical feminists, that the traditional patriarchal interpretations of Scripture are not all misreadings. There are inescapable patriarchal and misogynist elements intentionally taught in Scripture. However, Fiorenza argues, this time in some contrast with Ruether, that these androcentric elements pervade all of Scripture, including the prophetic tradition. She can find in the Bible no pure tradition or core of teachings that is consistently egalitarian.⁶² Indeed, she suggests that much of Scripture was written purposefully to patriarchalize or coverup egalitarian movements and motifs that characterized early Christian life.⁶³

In light of this pervasive androcentric factor, Fiorenza asserts that Scripture can function only as a source or prototype, not an unchanging norm for Christian feminist theology.⁶⁴ An important fact is that she does not see this as a radical stance. Indeed, she asserts that the Bible never has been and never can be in itself the final and unchanging norm for Christian life and thought. Rather, the final norm must be the Christian community that interprets Scripture.⁶⁵ This is so because: 1) the Bible is a product of the Christian commu-

regarding particular issues of Christian life and thought. Which of Paul's opinions should they choose, and why? After all, they are both in the canon.

⁶¹See especially, Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); *idem*, *Bread not Stone* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984); and *idem*, "The Will to Choose and to Reject: Continuing Our Critical Work," in Russell, *Feminist Interpretation*, 125-36.

⁶²Fiorenza, *Memory*, 17-18. Actually, Fiorenza appears to assume that Ruether considers the prophetic tradition to be more explicitly egalitarian than Ruether's later writings would suggest.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 34.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 33.

⁶⁵Fiorenza, *Bread*, 9. She argues that this is the case in both Catholic and Protestant traditions. Cf. Fiorenza, *Memory*, 34.

nity in the first place; 2) the Bible does not speak with a single or consistent voice, and therefore an authoritative interpreting community is necessary to adjudicate appeals to Scripture; and 3) the Bible serves as a functional authority only in the context of a community that embraces it.⁶⁶

At this point one might assume that Fiorenza, a Roman Catholic, is developing a standard defense for the magisterium of the Roman church. Such is hardly the case! Indeed, the magisterium is typically the first target of attack in Fiorenza's feminist critique because of its exclusive male constitution and its typically androcentric viewpoint.

Quite distinct from this official magisterium, the community that Fiorenza advances as the appropriate normative interpreter of Scripture is "women-church." By this title she intends to describe a movement of self-identified women and women-identified men from biblical times until the present. In other words, women-church is not comprised of all women, or of only women. It includes all those persons, and only those persons, who are committed to the struggle for women's liberation.⁶⁷

A Christian feminist's choice of such a normative community for interpreting Scripture is not surprising. Indeed, how does Fiorenza hope to defend the choice as anything other than prejudiced? Frankly, she does not! Drawing on liberation theology and recent hermeneutical philosophy, she argues that all interpretation is inescapably prejudiced. As such, one's goal cannot be to escape prejudice, but only to become critically aware of it through dialogue with alternative positions.⁶⁸ Seen in this light, the problem Fiorenza finds with previous Scripture interpretation is that there has been no women-identified voice present in the dialogue. She is seeking to add this voice.

At times, however, Fiorenza seems to make a much stronger defense of the (exclusive?) legitimacy of women-church as the normative interpreter of Scripture. She argues that the essence of the Christian view of revelation is that God's sustaining grace and liberating presence are most clearly revealed in the struggle of the oppressed for justice and freedom. Since the present patriarchal society and religion make women a focus of oppression, they also become a present normative locus of revelation and interpretive insight—to the degree, of course, that they struggle against this oppression.⁶⁹

⁶⁶See Fiorenza, *Bread*, 10-15; and Fiorenza, *Memory*, 13-14.

⁶⁷Fiorenza, *Bread*, xiv-xvi. One should carefully distinguish this use of "women-church" from the more common use referring to a community that is exclusively female. Cf. Ruether, *Women-Church*, 59-61.

⁶⁸See especially, Fiorenza, *Bread*, chs. 3, 6.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, xv-xvi, 13-14. Note her "neo-orthodox" assumption that revelation is to be located in Christian experience, not scriptural texts. Cf. Fiorenza, *Memory*, 34.

For Fiorenza, then, the definitive "Word of God" which becomes the criteria for interpreting Scripture is found not in any particular textual tradition of Scripture or in the intention of the whole of Scripture but in the experience of women-church. In light of their experience, contemporary Christian feminist interpreters can expose the patriarchal and misogynist elements in Scripture. They can also uncover resources for developing a women-identified form of Christianity.

But, why should Christian feminists spend their time dealing with Scripture at all if it is so heavily patriarchal? Why is it such an important resource to the contemporary women-church?

The thesis central to Fiorenza's overall program is that the early Christian movement included an authentic expression of the primitive Christian discipleship of equals (that is, women-church). Even though this community could claim the authority and model of Jesus, it was restricted and oppressed, albeit not completely eliminated, by the developing ecclesiastical patriarchy.⁷⁰ As a result, the historical memory of this group was nearly erased. Fiorenza's hope is that a recovered awareness of the social structure and heroic struggles of these egalitarian forerunners can serve both to nurture the present women-church in its own development and to offer a base for effectively contesting the reigning patriarchal authorities in society and church.⁷¹

As such, the vital contribution of Scripture for Christian feminists, in Fiorenza's view, is to be an enabling resource for the present women-church by making available the memory of a liberating historical prototype—first century women-church.⁷²

Locating this prototype in Scripture, however, is not an easy task. Indeed, Fiorenza argues that evidence for this community is typically present in Scripture only "underneath" the text itself because the authors of the texts (consciously or not, and in varying degrees) were supporters of the increasing androcentric and patriarchal codification of early Christianity. As such, contemporary interpreters must be careful to "read the silences" of the androcentric texts to see what they are trying to conceal or reject.⁷³ Only through such a critical reading can Christian feminist interpreters uncover the original egalitarian Christian community.

⁷⁰See especially, Fiorenza, *Bread*, 153n21; and *idem*, *Memory*, 34.

⁷¹Note the conclusion in Fiorenza, *Memory*, 351.

⁷²*Ibid.*, xxiii, 88; and Fiorenza, "Will to Choose," 136.

⁷³Fiorenza, *Memory*, 41, 32-33.

Such a critical reading involves much more than just the rejection of the obvious patriarchal elements in Scripture.⁷⁴ Often it will mean questioning even the apparently egalitarian passages in the Bible to uncover hidden or contrasting patriarchal elements.⁷⁵ Likewise, it will require the use of historical imagination to reconstruct a history for which Scripture itself often gives only the "tip of the iceberg." Obviously, such a reconstruction is a long-term task.⁷⁶ Equally obvious is that Fiorenza's overall approach ultimately replaces Scripture per se with this reconstructed history as the norm of contemporary Christian life.⁷⁷

Fiorenza's approach to Christian feminist interpretation is just beginning to receive the attention it deserves. In this process the questions or problematics she must address more fully are becoming evident.

For example, in light of her establishment of contemporary feminist consciousness as the norm of her historical reconstruction, many wonder why she is so concerned with history in the first place. What does the past have to offer her that is not already present? Fiorenza's basic response is that the (distorted) memory of the past, including the Bible, has shaped the present oppressive situation and women must either critically transform this memory or they will remain subject to its tyranny. Humans are too socially and historically conditioned to simply escape the past.⁷⁸ But, we are then faced with the question of how any such historical reconstruction, given its hypothetical nature, can ever form a sufficient basis or norm for a shared Christian life and practice.⁷⁹

Finally, concerning the category of women-church, does Fiorenza really believe the first century expression of this discipleship of equals was as pure as she sometimes seems to suggest. Such a pure human group is hard to imag-

⁷⁴For a detailed self-presentation of her method, see Fiorenza, *Bread*, 15-23; and *idem*, "Will to Choose," 130-36. For an example of the method at work, see Fiorenza, *Bread*, ch. 4.

⁷⁵Cf. her provocative and controversial reading of the Martha/Mary story in Luke 10:38-42. Fiorenza, "A Feminist Critical Interpretation for Liberation," *Religion and Intellectual Life* 3 (1986): 21-36.

⁷⁶*In Memory of Her* is Fiorenza's extended attempt at such a reconstruction.

⁷⁷Note in this regard Fiorenza's claim that she is "bracketing" the issue of the theological legitimization of the Bible in order to focus on historical reconstruction (*Memory*, 27). We would suggest, instead, that she has simply transferred the function of norm and the need for legitimization from text to (reconstructed) history.

⁷⁸See, Fiorenza, *Memory*, xix.

⁷⁹Cf. Mary Ann Tolbert, "Defining the Problem: The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics," *Semeia* 28 (1983): 113-26, esp. 124.

ine. Also, does not her definition of women-church ultimately remain exclusive rather than fostering a truly inclusive Christian community?⁸⁰

III. CONCLUSION

In the above survey we have been able only to hint at the variety and richness of exegetical insights available in the current discussion of scriptural teaching on women. We have tried instead to provide a typological framework for sorting out and comparing these often contrasting claims.

The choice of a particular model to use (or revise) for one's own approach to these issues will obviously depend on many factors, not the least of which will be one's own convictions about the nature and authority of Scripture and the role of tradition and community in interpreting Scripture. One may hope however, that the ultimate decision will be made in terms of which position deals most adequately with the full range of Scripture's contents in their historical context and which is sensitive to the breadth of Scripture's functions in the Christian community.

⁸⁰On these points see Ruether, "Review," 142-43. Note, however, Fiorenza's claim that she is not arguing for a pristine beginning (*Memory*, 92) and that her "exclusive" women-church is only a necessary penultimate stage to a final inclusive church (*Memory*, 346-47).



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